



## POLICY BRIEF

# Advancing Youth Employment through Agriculture and Food Systems Transformation in East Africa



This policy brief was jointly developed by the East African Community (EAC) Secretariat and FANRPAN with technical and financial support from the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA). It was developed as part of efforts to strengthen evidence-based policymaking and implementation of the Regional Agriculture Investment Plan (RAIP). The brief draws on the regional agriculture joint sector review (JSR) study for the East African Community that was carried out by the EAC through the support of the Bayesian consulting team and AGRA. The EAC acknowledges the contribution of all stakeholders who informed this process.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Creating meaningful employment for youth in the EAC region requires targeted interventions across multiple levels of the agri-food system.

- 1. Integrate Youth Employment into Agri-Food Systems Policies and Programmes**  
Ensure interventions to create youth employment as well as targets are embedded in national and regional agriculture strategies and investment plans.
- 2. Prioritize Agro-Processing for Job Creation**  
Invest in agro-industrial parks and rural processing hubs that include and support youth-led enterprises.
- 3. Scale-Up Youth Agribusiness Incubation**  
Expand agribusiness hubs offering training, mentorship, and finance to transition youth from learning to earning.
- 4. Link Finance to Employment Generation**  
Design youth-friendly financial instruments that reward enterprises creating jobs for youth, especially young women.
- 5. Harness Digital Agriculture for Youth Jobs**  
Invest in digital tools and services that generate employment in tech-enabled agricultural solutions.
- 6. Create Gender-Responsive Employment Programs**  
Implement targeted support that enables young women to access and thrive in agri-food employment opportunities.
- 7. Monitor and Track Job Creation Outcomes**  
Establish systems to track, evaluate, and report on youth employment generated through agri-food investments.

# INTRODUCTION

The East Africa Community (EAC) region is characterized by a young population, with youth (aged between 18 to 35) representing about 45% of the region's total population, with over 60% of the population under the age of 30 (East African Community, 2021). However, youth unemployment is a major concern; unemployment among the youth is 51-57%. Women, especially young women, face specific difficulties. For young women, the barriers are often compounded by gender inequality, which limits their participation and benefits from the agri-food systems (FAO, 2020). For example, in Uganda, youth unemployment is higher among women (50.5%) than among men. The youth's job situation is further complicated by a lack of decent jobs. This limits their ability to realize their potential, with negative knock-on effects for their families, communities, and societies. If correctly harnessed, the vast youth bulge can be leveraged to bring about a demographic dividend as the working-age population could support increased productivity, ensure food security, and strengthen inclusive economic growth.

Agriculture, which remains the backbone of the region's economy, offers substantial employment opportunities but has not attracted sufficient numbers of young people. This lack of participation is often due to outdated perceptions of agriculture as a sector limited to subsistence farming and low returns. Youth's participation in the agri-food system has huge potential. Youths are more receptive to new technologies and thus have the potential to energize the entire agrifood system, leading to increased productivity and efficiency. To capitalize on the potential of the agri-food systems, there is a need to shift mindsets and provide young people with the tools and support to thrive in modern agricultural value chains.

The issue of youth unemployment was highlighted in the EAC Heads of State Summit in February 2021, where the Heads of State prioritized unemployment as one of the region's most pressing challenges. At the summit, regional leaders pledged to collaborate on more effective policies to reduce youth unemployment and promote sustainable youth employment across various sectors. This summit demonstrated the political will of EAC member states to tackle youth unemployment comprehensively, through both regional cooperation and national initiatives (East African Community, 2021).

This policy brief presents actionable recommendations to enhance employment opportunities for youth and young women in agri-food systems across the East African Community (EAC). ***Drawing on insights from the 2024 Regional Joint Agriculture Sector Review (JSR) (East African Community, 2024)***, it identifies key opportunities and persistent barriers to meaningful participation. The brief underscores the importance of targeted policies, strategic investments, and multi-stakeholder partnerships to unlock the potential of young people, particularly young women, through innovative, inclusive approaches that address structural and systemic challenges in the sector.

# OPPORTUNITIES FOR YOUTH EMPLOYMENT IN AGRICULTURE AND FOOD SYSTEMS

The transformation of agri-food systems across the EAC region presents multiple entry points for youth and young women to meaningfully engage in and benefit from agriculture. Emerging trends in technology, climate resilience, value addition, and policy reform create dynamic spaces where youth can lead, innovate, and thrive.

## 1. Agro-Processing and Value Addition

The rising demand for processed and value-added agricultural products, driven by rising incomes and urbanization, offers vast opportunities for youth-led enterprises. Young people can explore business models in food-away-from-home (FAFH) food packaging, organic product development, beverage production, and spice processing. The development of agro-industrial parks and special economic zones, supported by governments and development partners, provides critical infrastructure and investment platforms for youth to grow their agribusiness ventures (AfDB, 2020).

## 2. Agritech and Digital Innovation

Digital agriculture is transforming the landscape of food production and marketing, creating opportunities for youth to engage as innovators, service providers, and tech entrepreneurs. From mobile apps offering real-time market data to drone-assisted precision farming and e-extension platforms, youth are uniquely positioned to drive the adoption of smart technologies. Tools such as mobile money and fintech solutions are also enabling greater access to finance, markets, and inputs (World Bank, 2020).

## 3. Farm Services

There is growing demands for services for example spraying services. Leveraging digital platforms youth can provide all kinds of services to farmers including mechanisation services a good example is Hello Tractor mobile app.

## 4. Sustainable Agriculture and Climate-Smart Practices

As climate change intensifies, sustainable farming practices are gaining traction. Youth can capitalize on emerging niches in climate-smart agriculture (CSA) including organic farming, agroecology, integrated pest management, and water-saving irrigation systems. These approaches not only enhance resilience and productivity but also appeal to environmentally conscious markets, creating opportunities for green jobs and sustainable livelihoods (FAO, 2020).

## EXISTING POLICIES, PLANS, AND INITIATIVES ON YOUTH EMPLOYMENT IN THE EAST AFRICA

The East African Community (EAC) and its member states have several regional and national initiatives aimed at addressing youth unemployment and creating opportunities for youth employment. Several policies, plans, and initiatives have been developed at both regional and national levels to foster youth empowerment, particularly in the agriculture and green sectors. These initiatives aim to equip young people with the necessary skills, resources, and opportunities to thrive in a rapidly changing economic landscape.

The [EAC Youth Policy \(2016-2021\)](#) was a critical regional framework designed to empower youth across the community. This policy emphasizes enhancing the creativity, skills, and potential of young people to make them productive members of society. It prioritizes increasing youth participation in economic activities, especially through education, skills development, and entrepreneurship. The policy aims to create gainful employment and opportunities for youth to engage in sustainable development. By aligning this policy with national-level strategies, the EAC aims to foster youth-driven economic growth (EAC, 2016).

Another important regional initiative is the [East Africa Climate Change Master Plan \(2021-2031\)](#), which highlights the potential for youth to engage in green jobs across the region. These green jobs span various sectors, including renewable energy, climate-smart agriculture, and environmental conservation. This initiative provides the framework for creating long-term employment opportunities for young people while addressing climate change impacts. The EAC is positioning itself as a leader in the global push for sustainability, and youth are central to this transformation (East African Community, 2021). These green initiatives not only offer job opportunities but also provide youth with the chance to be at the forefront of innovative solutions to global challenges.

At the national level, EAC member states have demonstrated a clear commitment to addressing youth unemployment through tailored national policies, institutional frameworks, and targeted programs, particularly in the agricultural sector, which remains a strategic entry point for large-scale youth employment. While implementation varies, common themes include youth-focused policies, financial inclusion mechanisms, agribusiness training programs, and institutional platforms for youth engagement.

**Youth and Employment Policies Across the EAC** - Across the EAC, member states have adopted national youth policies that strategically position agriculture as a key sector for employment generation. Countries like Burundi and Tanzania place strong emphasis on vocational training and entrepreneurship within agriculture and agro-processing, while Kenya, Rwanda, and Uganda embed agriculture alongside ICT and leadership development as priority sectors in national youth empowerment strategies. The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and South Sudan focus on youth-led income-generating activities in agriculture and

forestry, and link these to peacebuilding and reconstruction in post-conflict contexts. These policy frameworks reflect a growing regional consensus that investing in youth through agribusiness-oriented skills, training, and access to resources is essential for tackling unemployment and accelerating inclusive economic growth.

**Youth Development and Employment Funds** - EAC countries have established diverse financing mechanisms to support youth-led enterprises and facilitate job creation across agricultural value chains. Kenya's Youth Enterprise Development Fund (YEDF) and Uganda's Youth Livelihood Programme are well-known models offering grants, loans, and business support services targeted at youth in agriculture, manufacturing, and services. Similarly, Rwanda's Youth Employment Fund supports innovation in agri-tech and green economy ventures, while Burundi, South Sudan, and DRC run tailored funding schemes with a focus on rural startups, agribusiness cooperatives, and local processing. In Tanzania, financing initiatives are being piloted through agricultural development banks and regional authorities. While implementation varies, these schemes collectively aim to close the youth financing gap and stimulate entrepreneurship-led employment, particularly in rural areas.

**Agribusiness and Rural Employment Programs** - EAC member states are also rolling out practical programs to equip youth with skills and opportunities across agricultural value chains. Uganda's Youth Agribusiness Centres serve as rural hubs for training, mentorship, and market integration, while Tanzania focuses on commercial agriculture training zones with private sector support. Burundi partners with development agencies to enhance youth access to modern farming techniques and markets, and South Sudan links agricultural training to post-conflict recovery and youth reintegration. In Kenya, youth-inclusive programs under the Big 4 Agenda promote food processing and rural industrialization, whereas Rwanda's NEP-Kora Wigire supports agribusiness incubation and cooperative development. The DRC, with support from FAO and IFAD, facilitates the establishment of youth-led agricultural cooperatives, particularly in regions with high unemployment. Collectively, these initiatives are vital for converting agriculture's potential into real employment opportunities for youth.

**Youth Leadership and Agricultural Advocacy** - Beyond enterprise, youth are increasingly serving as change agents and advocates for inclusive food systems. Their involvement in policy dialogues, youth networks, and community-based organizations offers a platform to influence reforms in land rights, access to finance, and gender equity. By participating in governance structures and advocating for pro-youth agricultural policies, young people can help shape an enabling environment for their peers (FAO, 2020).

**Youth Engagement Institutions** - Institutional mechanisms for youth engagement have been strengthened across EAC member states through the establishment of national youth councils and unions that advocate for youth inclusion in policymaking and agricultural development. Kenya, Rwanda, and Uganda have vibrant national youth councils that influence policy, promote agribusiness training, and foster community engagement. In Burundi and Tanzania, these institutions help integrate youth perspectives into rural development and support access to training and finance. South Sudan's National Youth Union and DRC's

Conseil National de la Jeunesse play vital roles in amplifying youth voices and coordinating cooperatives in agriculture and natural resources. These structures are critical for institutionalizing youth participation and ensuring accountability in youth-targeted employment programs.





## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

### 1. Integrating Youth Employment into Agricultural Policies

To unlock the full employment potential of agriculture, EAC member states should integrate youth-specific job creation targets into all relevant policies and investment plans. These targets should be disaggregated by gender and geography and aligned with priority value chains such as horticulture, fisheries, and agroforestry. Youth participation must be ensured throughout the policy cycle, from design to implementation, to guarantee that strategies reflect their realities and ambitions.

### 2. Positioning Agro-Processing as a Youth Employment Engine

Agro-processing offers a major opportunity for large-scale youth employment, particularly in rural and peri-urban areas. Investments in agro-industrial parks and processing hubs should deliberately include youth-led enterprises and cooperatives. Public procurement and infrastructure support must be leveraged to help youth gain market access and build viable businesses within value-added segments of the agri-food system

### **3. Expanding Agribusiness Incubation for Employment Pathways**

Youth agribusiness incubation centers can serve as gateways from training to employment. Expanding these hubs will equip young people with practical skills, finance, and mentorship, while also linking them to job opportunities across production, logistics, and agri-services. Public-private partnerships are essential for scaling these models and formalizing pathways into decent work.

### **4. Linking Financial Access to Employment Generation**

Financial instruments must go beyond access, they must be structured to directly promote employment creation. Grant schemes, concessional loans, and revolving funds should incentivize youth-led businesses that generate jobs, particularly for young women. Removing collateral barriers and supporting franchising models can further stimulate job growth and rural enterprise.

### **5. Creating Jobs Through Digital Agriculture**

Digital innovations are transforming agriculture and opening new frontiers for youth employment. From app development to digital extension services and data collection, the digital agriculture space offers diverse roles for youth. Governments must invest in rural connectivity, build digital literacy, and partner with the private sector to create an ecosystem where young people can thrive in tech-enabled agriculture.

### **6. Ensuring Gender-Responsive Job Creation for Young Women**

Young women face unique challenges in accessing agricultural employment and must be supported through deliberate, gender-responsive approaches. This includes establishing quotas in employment programs, offering childcare and mobility support, and encouraging private sector hiring through incentives. Tailored training and safe workspaces will further enable women to access and excel in agri-food jobs.

### **7. Tracking and Coordinating Youth Employment Outcomes**

To ensure accountability, EAC countries need integrated systems to track youth employment in agriculture. Ministries of youth, labor, and agriculture should coordinate efforts to measure job creation outcomes and inform policy adjustments. A regional observatory hosted by the EAC could support harmonized data collection, cross-country learning, and engagement with youth networks for transparency and feedback.



## CONCLUSION

The persistent youth unemployment crisis in the EAC is not simply a policy challenge, it is a missed opportunity to transform the region's future. Agri-food system remains one of the few sectors with the capacity to absorb large numbers of youth while also driving inclusive economic growth and transformation. However, this potential will remain dormant unless governments and partners make deliberate, sustained investments in job creation supported by requisite policies.

By prioritizing employment outcomes across every stage of the agri-food value chain, the EAC can convert agriculture into a dynamic engine for youth opportunity. This will require not just integrating youth into existing systems but designing systems that work for youth, particularly those in rural areas and young women, who face the highest barriers but also represent the greatest untapped potential.

Creating jobs for youth in agriculture is not only about economic development, it is about stability, dignity, and a shared future. When young people are meaningfully employed, they contribute to food security, innovation, environmental stewardship, and social cohesion. The time to invest in youth employment is now, boldly, strategically, and with the urgency the moment demands.

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## EAC

The East African Community (EAC) is a regional intergovernmental organization of seven Partner States: Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo, Kenya, Rwanda, South Sudan, Tanzania, and Uganda. The EAC was established to promote economic, political, social, and cultural integration, with the goal of improving the quality of life of the people of East Africa through increased competitiveness, value-added production, and trade. The EAC works to harmonize policies and programs across member states in key areas such as agriculture, trade, health, infrastructure, and the environment. For more information, visit <https://www.eac.int>.



## AGRA

AGRA is a proudly African-led institution focused on scaling agricultural innovations that help smallholder farmers towards increased incomes, better livelihoods, and improved food security. Since 2006, AGRA has worked with partners, governments, non-governmental organizations, private sector businesses, and more; to deliver a set of proven solutions to smallholder farmers and indigenous African agricultural enterprises. AGRA puts smallholder farmers first on the agenda, recognizing that no country has moved from low income to middle income without agricultural transformation. For more information visit <https://agra.org/>



## FANRPAN

The Food, Agriculture and Natural Resources Policy Analysis Network (FANRPAN) is an autonomous regional stakeholder-driven policy research, analysis and implementation network that was formally established by Ministers of Agriculture from Eastern and Southern Africa in 1997. FANRPAN was borne out of the need for comprehensive policies and strategies required to resuscitate agriculture. FANRPAN is mandated to work in all African countries and currently has activities in 17 countries namely Angola, Benin, Botswana, Democratic Republic of Congo, Kenya, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Swaziland, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

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© FANRPAN Regional Secretariat, 141 Cresswell Road, Weavind Park 0184, Private Bag X2087, Silverton 014, Pretoria, South Africa. Telephone: +27 12 804 2966. Facsimile: +27 12804 0600. Email: [policy@fanrpan.org](mailto:policy@fanrpan.org). Website: [www.fanrpan.org](http://www.fanrpan.org)